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ABSTRACT

Secondary school lessons on women in modern Indian society as they are portrayed in 20th century works of literature are presented. The lessons focus on four novels, and could be read in conjunction with the study of a period of Indian history. Each lesson features background on the author, a list of discussion questions, and suggested writing activities. An annotated list of works featuring 20th century women authors who have been recognized by the world community for their achievements also is provided. As background reading for teachers, a lecture on the status of women and a brief history of the womens' movement in India is appended. (DB)

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Women in Modern Indian Literature

High School Level

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January, 1990

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MS. Lunching Chiao, Project Director

Indian women are not well understood by people in the West. In a similar vein Indian literature is unfamilar to many. Before I started this project I did not have a clear picture of Indian women or an appreciation for Indian literature. Indeed as I proceeded I felt my preconceived images of Indian women being challenged. I had held in my mind the image of a dark beauty draped in a colorful sari. She is submissive and obedient to her husband who takes care of all her needs. Or I pictured the peasant woman with a horde of hungry children whom she can not adequately feed, shelter or clothe. She struggles in the fields and is often seen carrying an urn of water on her head from the village watering hole to her residence. For both, I pictured the arranged wedding where she is forced to remove herself from her mother's home and goes off to live in a new household where she is not often openly welcomed and integrated into the family structure. She is bound by the beliefs, customs, and rituals of a religious system. Antithetical to this I had the image of Indira Gandhi, a powerful woman and prime minister, who challenges the image of the woman strictly a the keeper of the house.

During my visit to India under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education's Fulbright-Hays Seminar Abroad Program and under the leadership of U.S. Educational Foundation in India, my perceptions of Indian women were transformed. I developed a deep respect for these women who face untold challenges every day whether rich or poor. Their stuggles are both inner and outer. They struggle to gain equality in educational and employment opportunities that are guaranteed by some of the most modern laws and a constitution. They struggle to maintain equanimity as they live in a more modern world which espouses new attitudes about women's positions in caste and community or jobs and family, but where society at large does not easily live according to them. The pioneers pay the highest price in their personal suffering. The literature of modern women writers such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markanadaya, and Ruth Prawer Jhabvala record the pain and loneliness of those women struggling to forge a place for themselves in the New India. The mixture of old traditions and modern attitudes causes many conflicts.

I was stuck by the wide variety of lifestyles among women. Not only are there large Hindu and Muslim populations in India, but there are Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Jewish, Christian, and Bhuddhist peoples who work to maintain their identity. Religion governs their lives, as does the region and environment in which they live. The differences are much greater than in the United States. Nevertheless, women share many of the same dreams and hopes. The attitudes that guide them, help them, or restrict them are different.

Through lectures sponsored by USEFI about the women's movement in India; through conversations with high school students in Delhi, Bombay, and Madras; through interviews with professional women in the cities; through interviews

with peasant women in the rural areas; through a conversation with the editor of Femina, a major women's magazine; and through the reading of newspaper articles on women in advertising, women in the media, the legal status of women, the increase of brideburning or dowry deaths; through my reading of novels, poetry, and short stories by Indian authors, especially women authors; and my observations of the treatment of women in the streets, I have gained a new picture of the Indian woman. There is not one, but there are many. Each with her own story to tell. Literature offers a plethora of stories.

I chose to investigate this subject because I live and teach in a rural area where children do not have many personal experiences with cultural or ethnic differences. Our community is rather homogeneous. As these children graduate and go off to new places, especially the girls, will meet new challenges. By exploring and gaining an understanding of the struggles of Indian women, my students, whether male or female, will understand the contributions of all people to our world. And they will appreciate the value of each individual. By investigating women in a distant place, perhaps they will gain a greater appreciation for women in our culture. I chose fiction as one vehicle for gaining an understanding of Indian women and as a means to expose the students to contemporary Indian literature. I chose mainly the women authors of India as the speakers for their sisters. They have lived being a woman in Indian society. They have been shaped by it.

METHODOLOGY

The teacher will find an annotated list of works which can be read by high school students. Selections focus on the works of twentieth century women authors who have been recognized by the world community for their achievements.

The lessons included focus on four texts which could be read by the entire class in conjunction with the study of a period of Indian history. They depict the traditional view of Indian women as represented by Sita, the wife of Rama in the Ramayana; the rural woman forced to live a marginal existence in dire poverty caused by modernity; the urban woman who lives in the midst of poverty; and the middle class woman who is so often unfulfilled and lonely in her arranged marriage that offers little other than economic security. Other books could be assigned to individual students for special reports.

As backgorund reading for the teacher I have transcribed a lecture on the status of women in India and a brief history of the women's movement presented by a woman activist in Calcutta in July, 1989.

As openers for this study of Indian women I put together a series of slides which depict the vast variety of environments, jobs, and situations that Indian women confront

in their daily activities. I show these accompanied to a tape of Indian music.

SLIDES:
1. Rajasthani landscape
2. Ghats (hills)
3. Himalayas
4. Goddesses from Temple Sculpture: Parvati, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kali
5. Moghul Paintings of Women
6. Kutch woman stitching
7. Jaipur: woman in outline of palace arch
8. Rajasthan: woman carrying urn on head
   woman in the fields
   Muslim woman at village meeting w/men
9. Mother and child on mosque steps
10. Placard on mosque denying entrance to women
11. Sikh girl at temple pool
    Sikh temple in Delhi
12. Bombay: schoolgirls at Godrej school
    Kindergarten Class
    Sewing Class
    Movie advertisement
13. Delhi: Muslim schoolgirls at Qutab Minar
    High school girls at school assembly
    Harajan girls dancing
    Woman in sari on city streets
    Woman in salwar
    Woman in western dress
    Couple on rickshaw
    Couple on motorbike
    Female police officer
    Women working at construction site
    Women carrying firewood
14. Mysore: women selling vegetables
    Women selling garlands
    Women selling kumkum powder
15. Srinigar: Muslim women behind their veils
    Kashmiri girls in the mountain's hillside
    Muslim women on the bullock cart
    Pilgrims on their journey
16. Indian classical dancers
17. Professional women: Sharada Nayak, USEFI
    Vamil Patel, editor Femina
    Kuntala, biologist
    Malvika Karlekar, anthropologist
18. Hindu wedding: Bride and groom on throne
    Bride and groom before the Brahmin
19. Mothers with children
20. Mother Theresa in Calcutta
21. Varanasi: Widow with a shaved head
    Women bathing on the ghats

22. The Ganges

The slides provide wonderful visual images that compliment the literary sources.

The teacher may compile a series of slides from the plethora of books and magazines available on India. There are a vast number of films about Indian society which could also set the tone. These include the Indian classic, The World of Apu; A Passage to India; Gandhi; Chachaji: My Poor Relation; or Salaam, Bombay.

A fashion show is also a wonderful opener. Wrapping a student in a sari, putting bindis on girls' foreheads, or creating hand paintings (mehandi) are all fun activities. Indian folk crafts which are often done by women can be a way to show the talents of Indian women. The text, Shilpa, provides a number of classroom activities from including block printing, floor design, wall decorations, puppet making, folk dancing, and folk singing.

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OBJECTIVES

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The student will:

1) identify the roles of women in Indian society
2) describe the traditional attitudes toward Indian women
3) describe the differences in lifestyles of the urban and rural Indian women
4) understand the process of modernity on Indian women
5) describe the impact of poverty on the poor women of India
6) understand the impact of religion on Indian women
7) compare Western attitudes towards women with those of Indians

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LIST OF LITERARY SOURCES

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Ramayana. by Valmiki. Retold by R.K. Narayan. New York: Norton, 1977.

The Ramayana is one of the two Indian epics, the other being the Mahabharata. In the Ramayama is a love story about Lord Rama, a beloved prince who is denied the right to inherit the throne from his father. He goes to live in the forest in order not to disrupt the passage of power to his brother. Rama does his dharma. His devoted wife, Sita, also renounces her comfortable, luxurious lifestyle in the palace to go serve her husband in the forest. She, too, does her dharma. In love there is dharma. She lives her life as the

perfect Hindu woman and, therefore, becomes the model for others. During her stay in the forest she is kidnapped. Rama gathers many forces to regain his wife. Upon her return, because she has lived under the roof of another, her purity is questioned and she must be tried according to custom. THe trial is by fire. After the flames which have surrounded her die down, she is left untouched. Agni, the god of fire, has atteseted to her purity and faithfulness to Rama.

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Tagore, Rabindranath. Home and the World. Madras: Macmillan, 1980. or Collected Works. New York: Gordon Press, 1977.

This is the story of a husband and wife who are personally challenged by the new attitudes of the modern world. It is set against the backdrop of the nationalist movement in India. Bimala has been brought in the custom of purdah. Accordingly she has had no contact with men outside of the members of her own family. Her husband, Nikhil, is an exceptional landlord who has revolutionary ideas about his relationship with his wife. Sandip, a leader in the nationalist movement, comes into their home and sets in motion a series of changes.

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Markanadaya, Kamala. Nectar in the Sieve. New York: Signet Paperback(New American Library), 1982.

A simple peasant woman, Rukmani, in a village in India struggles to care for those she loves. As a child she was married to a tenant farmer whom she had never met. She leaves her village to go live with hm and work side by side with him in the fields. She lives in the midst of changing times that present her with many hardships. One of her children dies from starvation. Another becomes a prostitute. Her sons are forced to leave the land for jobs in a factory and finally for jobs in the city. Poverty finally forces her along with her husband to leave the land they have worked for so long. The new hardships they encounter are incredible.

_____. A Handful of Rice. New York: Crowell, 1966.

This depicts life in the modern city. It is a life of continous struggle and demoralization. The son of a peasant who had no hope of surviving in his village joined the exodus to the city. This is the daily occurrence in Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and other large cities in India. People live on the streets or in shanties without basic sanitatory facilities or access to clean water. The peasant, Ravi, settles into a life in the underworld. Nalini, a woman of upper caste, becomes his wife and tries to change him, but to no avail. He struggles to provide for his children, but the

circumstances of poverty become too much.

_____. Two Virgins. New York: Crowell Press, 1973.

Told through the eyes of a younger daughter, Saroja, we have the story of a family. Their origins are in the village imbued with the values of traditional life and ancient beliefs. Saroja grows up with her older beautiful sister, Lalitha, who attracts the attention a filmmaker. The girls develop conflicts with their parents as they encounter love and new material values. Relationships, not only with their family, but also with their village, are challenged as they struggle to find their place inthe world. The city calls and the girls go, struggling with the changes.

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Desai, Anita. Cry, The Peacock. Delhi: Orient Press (Ind-US, Inc.), 1980.

Available through India-US, Incorporated
Box 56
East Glastonbury, CT. 06025
203-663-0045

A young girl, Maya, has lived a privileged life. She has enjoyed the sheltered life her father created. Married off to a busy lawtey she lacks the attention she had grown to enjoy from her father. Her daily life becomes a struggle as she is unable to resolve her marital discord and is obsessed with a childhood prophesy of disaster. She is a lonely woman with a strong streak of neurosis. The tragedy that entails could not be averted.

_____. Fire On the Mountain. New York: Harper and Row, 1977.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

An elderly woman, Nanda Kaul, decides to spend the last years of her life in the mountains. Her life was filled with the business and responsibilities of being a good daughter, wife, and granmother. She has tired of those demands and sought solitude in the comfort of the mountains. When a grand daughter experiences a breakdown, her great grand daughter, Raka, comes to stay with Nanda Kaul. This fragile, secretive girl intrudes upon Nada's life causing great resentment. With time Raka changes things and awakens new needs within her great-grandmother. Furthermore Nanda Kaul admits the truth about her own life, but only when faced with the horror of the violent ending.

_____. Voices in the City. Delhi: Orient Press (India US,Inc.),1982.

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

This story decribes the demoralizing effects of city life on an Indian family. Nirode, the bohemian son, was raised by an over indulgent mother. He chooses to settle down in Calcutta to a iife of austerity, when in fact he could enjoy a comfortable lifestyle. His older sister, Monisha, endures a servile lifestyle within the suppressive and rigid limits of the traditional Hindu family. Amla, the second sister, pursues a career in the city in contrast to her sister's life. She develops a haunting relationship with an artist. Monisha's dreadful decision is one that is lived out often among middle class women who can find no way of resolving their inner conflicts. This is reflection of the social transitions which India is experiencing and its impact on woman. The old social values are not completely dead and the new ones are not fully formed.

_____. Where Shall We Go This Summer. Delhi: Orient Press (Ind-US, Inc.), 1982.

In this story a lonely, married woman, Sita, attempts to change her life rather than accept an ordinary existence. On the outside she has a comfortable life with her family in an apartment in the city. She has healthy, prospering children and is about to have another. The prospect of another child and the daily suffering of boredom and hyprocrisy of the people around her empower her to take action. Gathering her children together she takes them for a vacation on the island than was her home in childhood. On returning to the island she finds it is not the place she remembers. Her anquish increases as she realizes what she has brought her children to and faces the disillusioning truth about her own mother and father. She also finds that she cannot easily forsake the bonds she has to her middle class existence.

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Jhabvala, Ruth. The Householder. New York: Norton, 1985.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala is a German of Polish parents who was later raised in England. She married an Indian gentleman and has lived in India since with her children and husband. Her writing is filled with much wit and humor.

This tells the story of a young middle class couple, whose marriage was arranged, come to love and cherish eachother after the event.

_____. How I Became a Holy Mother and Other Stories. New York: Penguin, 1981.

This is a collection of short stories which explore the

inner struggles of a variety of Indian women. "A Bad Woman" tells the story of a woman who is the mistress of a man living in another city. He provides a place for her to live and visits periodically. During one of his absences she devolps a romantic relationship with another man. Her feelings are torn between both. "The Housewife" depicts the life of an ordinary woman who takes up singing lessons as an outlet for her boredom. It becomes a passion and leads to dependent relationship with her teacher. "In the Mountains" explores the struggles of a woman who has shunned the comfort of family life and hyprocisy of middle class values to pursue a life close to nature. Her family still manages to intrude and for a time upset the balance she has found. Her habits and values challenge the accepted norms.

_____. The Nature of Passion. New York: Penquin Books, 1983.

Lalaji, a selfmade contractor, who indulges his children with everything they want and more, comes into conflict with them. The children Viddi, the son, and Nimmi, the daughter, wish to pursue other interests and possess different values more in line with the "New India." Nimmi wishes to marry the man of her choice, while Viddi wants to be a writer and have nothing to do with his father's business. Laliji sticks to his belief in the traditional Indian values. He despises the Western fads and fashions which the super rich of Delhi flaunt. These status symbols hold no appeal for him. The older women in the family abide by the same values. Through the struggles each side comes to undertand the other better and makes compromises.

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ACTIVITIES

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Included for the teacher are discussion questions and suggested activities for four of the literary works. I chose these works because they represent the issues of modern Indian women. There are a great variety of women in India. Whether they be Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh; whether they be living in a village or city; or whether be wealthy or poor, Indian women are faced with the complex issues. They are dealing with their bonds to the values and beliefs to traditional India which have not completely died and their aspirations to enjoy the rights and amenities of the modern world. Poor women are being pushed to a marginal existence in poverty, while upper class women struggle for their mental well being. The struggles are similar across the globe, but those of India have their unique qualities. Through the stories we gain a picture of those struggles and triumphs.

I have chosen the Ramayana from the ancient world because it gives the foundation of the traditional values of

India. Then I have moved to the era of the independence movement in Tagore's Home and the World, because at this time men began to change some of their attitudes towards women. Contacts with the West and recognition of the contributions of Indian women to the nationalist movement play a part in the changes women would experience. Laws gave them rights and modern thinkers espoused freedom for women, but society in reality is in a slow process of transition. It is faster inthe city than in the village. Next I have moved to the contemporary era which has witnessed the greatest problems for women in India. The modern world has raised some to new freedoms and opportunities while denying them equanimity, but plunged many more into abject poverty. Nectar in a Seive and Voices in the City depict these transitions. In these a female author speaks for her fellow Indian women. Only in the twentieth century could this happen.

I. Ramayana. R.K. Narayan

A. Background

R.K. Narayan is one of the most respected novelists in India. He was born in Madras and educated in Mysore. In his novels he has created the fictional world of Malgudi. His work, The Financial Expert, which is set in Malgudi depicts the negotiations for an arranged marriage. He is also well known for his storytelling of the Hindu myths and epics. He has been the winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, India's highest literary honor.

Activities in chapter five of India: A Teacher's Guide published by Focus on Asian Studies through the Asia Society; 725 Park Avenue; New York, N.Y., are wonderful for investigating marriage practices in modern India. It connects well with the Ramayana. Chapter 4 on articulating values is also excellent. I recommend both.

B. Discussion Questions

Sita, the wife of Rama, is the ideal Hindu woman

1. List the qualities of the ideal traditional Indian woman as shown by Sita.
   List the expectations that religious norms place on her.
2. Cite passages from the text which exemplify each of these qualities in Sita.
3. Make a statement explaining what ancient India valued in women- with Sita as your guide.
3. Which qualities do you admire in Sita? Why?
   Which qualities do you find weak? Why?
4. What qualities do you admire in women today?
5. Compare Sita to the Greco-Roman heroines and

character. Each was a wife of high standing faced with difficult circumstances.

Penelope, the wife of Odysseus
Helen, the wife of Menelaus and taken to Troy
Antigone, champion of her ideal
Dido, Queen abandonned by Aeneas
Clytmnestra, the wife of Agamemnon
Hecuba, Queen of Troy

6. How does Rama treat Sita? Why?
   What is Sita expected to do for Rama?
   How does Rama feel about Sita?
7. Why does Sita agree to the trial by fire?
   What does her agreement reveal about her?
   How does she deal with personal adversity and conflict?
   How are women today taught to deal with difficulties?
8. How does the community view Sita?
   How does the community treat her?
   In our world and in our media how do we treat women like Sita? Princess Di
   Rose Kennedy
   Mrs. Bush
   etc.
   How do we treat stars? Marilyn Monroe
   Madonna
   etc.
   How do we treat women in adversity?
   the central park jogger
   rape victims
   welfare mothers
   the homeless
   etc.

C. Writing Activities

1. Make a diary for Sita.
   Write entries concerning important events in her life.

   a. Marriage to Rama
   b. Life in the palace
   C. Move to the forest
   d. Kidnapping
   e. Her return to Rama
   f. Trial by Fire

   Assuming her persona keep a record of her personal experiences, observations, feelings and reactions to events.

2. Write a skit in which you depict her reunion with

Rama.

3. Write an imaginary letter to Rama that recreates her emotions during one of the events.

4. Write a marriage advertisement imagining you are Rama.

5. Create a poster that typifies the ideal traditional Hindu woman with examples of the expectations and pressures imposed by outside forces.

II. Home and the World. Rabindranath Tagore

A. Background

Tagore, born in 1861, came from a famous family of religiuos and social reformers, musicians, and artists. He spent his childhood in a literary atmosphere in the Bengal region around Calcutta. This was recognized as the literary center of India. He wrote in Bengali. In 1913 he was awarded the Nobel prize for literature.

The filmmaker, Satyajit Ray, has created a wonderful film version of the novel. It is not readily available from a distributor, but periodically is shown in "art" circles. I recommend seeing it, if you have the opportunity.

AT the time in which this novel is set, purdah was common in many parts of India. Women were totally excluded from the outside world and lived their lives sheltered behind veils and screens. This novel depicts the impact of change on one woman.

B. Discussion Questions

What is different about the structure of this novel?

1. Describe Bimala's relationship to Nikhil.
   In what ways is she a typical Hindu wife?
   In what ways is Nikhil an atypical husband?
2. What are Bimala's responsibilties in the household?
   Who else lives in the household with them?
   Describe Bimala's relationship to the others.
   How does she act as a balancing mechanism within the family?
3. How does Bimala view her world?
   How does she view the outside world?
   What attracts her to the outside?
   What makes Bimala happy? What disturbs her?
4. What role other than husband does Nikhil play in Bimala's life?
   How does Nikhil treat her? Why?

Does Bimala understand him? Why or why not?

5. How does Sandip change Bimala's perception of the world?
   Why does Bimala pursue their relationship?
6. Bimala experiences a tragedy. How does it change her life?
   What must she confront in herself?
7. What do you admire in her?
   What do you find weak?
8. What similar problems are women in our world confronted with today? How do we deal with them? Are there limits to what is considered acceptable attitudes and behavior for American women? What price is paid by those who step over the line?

C. Writing Activities

1. Write a diary from Bimala's point of view.

2. Be an investigative reporter and write an account of the tragedy.

3. Write an imaginary letter to Bimala expressing your opinions on the choices she has made. React to her situation and offer advice or encouragement.

   Or assume the role of a devout Hindu and write to her about her situation. What has she done wrong?

4. Create an editorial by Nikhil about the new roles of Indian women.

III. Nectar in a Sieve. Kamal Markandaya.

A. Background

South India was home to Kamal Markandaya as a child. She attended Madras University and worked as a journalist and writer in both India and England. Nectar in a Sieve was her first novel and received wide critical acclaim.

Prereading activities might include a viewing of Salaam, Bombay available from Cinecom Films in New York; India's Working Women from the Asia Society; or Chachaji: My Poor Relative from Icarus Films in New York. Each of these give a view of the efforts of ordinary people to survive in the throes of poverty.

B. Discussion Questions

1. What activities is a woman expected to do in the American household? What does she have to aid her? What specific roles do wives and mother play in

the American family. Keep a list.

2. What activities are Rukmani responsible for in her household? What roles does she play in her family?
3. Compare Rukmani's daily life with a typical American's.
4. What does Rukmani value in her life? How does she show this?
   Compare her values to those in America.
5. How is her marriage arranged? What are her feelings about it?
6. What are her attitudes and feelings for her children? In what ways are they the same as American mothers'? Do Americans value children in the same way as this Indian family? Give examples.
7. How does Rukmani deal with the losses in her life? Death and movements. loss of material goods
   How do Americans deal with such things?
8. What do you admire and respect in Rukmani? Has she had a full life?
9. What are her attitudes toward change in her life? What causes the changes?
10. What outside forces that impact her life are beyond her control? What contributes to her loss of status and decline into poverty?

C. Writing Activities

1. Write a skit about an imaginary panel for a talk show. Oprah or Geraldo.
   The panel consists of Rukmani's family-
   Rukmani, her husband Nathan, her daughter Irawaddy, her son Maragun
   The topic is "The Plight of the Tenant Farmer"
   Relate the struggles of these people to survive and the impact of the modern world on their lifestyle.

2. Imagine you are a government official responsible for providing services to the rural poor women.

   Write a document in which you:
   a) list the needs of the poor women
   b) explain an action plan to provide programs to alleviate the problems
   c) explain how you will evaluate the success of your programs

IV. Voices in the City. Anita Desai.

A. Background

Born to a Bengali father and German mother, Anita Desai was educated in Delhi. She is among the handful of women novelist in India. Her work has received great acclaim around the world. For her novel, Fire On the Mountain, she won the Sahitya Akademi Award.

The Apu Trilogy- The World of Apu are films that provide a good view of the dilemmas that urban life have presented the middle class as they struggle with the transition of social norms in India. They are available from Films Incorporated in California. Salaam, Bombay provides a view of the seediness of the rapidly growing Indian cities.

B. Discussion Questions

1. Describe Nirode's lifestyle and how his mother and sisters view it. How do their attitudes fit the role of "family adjustor?"
2. Does he have freedoms or rights that his sisters are denied? If so, give examples. How do they view the differences.?
3. What are the concerns his family has for him? How does he react to their concerns and how does he treat his mother and sisters?
4. Describe Nirode's relationship with his sisters.
5. How do Amla and Monisha differ? What is good in each of their lives? What is bad? or what makes them unhappy?
6. Describe Monisha's relationship to her husband and his family? How does she fit into the family structure? Are her relstions with her husband anfd extended family good? Why or why not?
7. What is the source of Monisha's pain? Could her pain have been avoided? Are the people around her aware of her suffering?
8. Monisha made a dreadful choice. What were her other options in the world in which she lived?
9. What level of responsibility do her sister, her brother, her mother, her husband and his family play in her death?
10. Can society be held responsible? Why or why not?

C. Writing Activities

1. Assume the role of Nirode, write an article for his magazine about his view of women in India.

2. Write a letter to Monisha about her situation. Share your thoughts and feelings with her.

3. Write a newspaper feature story about the sudden death of Monisha as an example of a new phenomenon in Indian society. Others examples are the dowry death burnings. Interview the family and friends so that you may present a round picture of her.

Lecture and Interview with Women Activists;
Calcutta, India; July, 1989

Talking about Indian women is a rather tough assignment. We are talking about 400 million people who live in varied circumstances. Not that your country is not much larger. We have a country of driving traditions and beliefs. Anything that you can think of that makes this a much more difficult subject to tackle.

For example, someone like me lives in a house, can have two showers a day, can have a flush toilet, and a little garden. Then you have people in the same city who fight over buckets of water and then you have other areas where women walk over five miles a day to get clean drinking water. You have that kind of variety. Then you also have the kind of variety in a village, say in Kerala, which is in the south of India. About 80% of the women will be literate, reading the newspaper. Then in another region, say Bihar, not one woman would be literate. So you have that kind of variety. Or within the same city, within the same class or caste, you have women who are now pilots of airplanes and going to the bizaar. Within the same group you have a woman who would not be allowed to go to the bazaar without someone going with her. So you have all this to cover. And that's why I'm going to be cursory about what I say.

When we talk about the subject, there is a pattern to the Indian woman, because in spite of all the varieties, there are certain points where the parameters of their lives are fairly similar. Just one very common idea is that every woman has to get married. She is expected to get married by age twenty or twenty five or so. And not getting married is really making a point or failure. All this is tied to the fact of whether you are married or unmarried. So that is such an imperative that the custom of dowry and home practice about the role of brides comes from that. That means you have to get married, so you have to pay a price for her. In that sense whether you are Hindu or Muslim or whether you're a Sikh, does not really make a difference. You have to get married. And young people talk about young women distinguishing different communities, castes , or class; and what you have is in religion, family structure. The most important thing you have here is what you might call family structure.

Family, patriarchy has control over women. These are fairly similar in most groups in the sense that they are set. First thing is that you have to get married. Secondly, inwardly you have to accept the fact that there is a divide between the women's world and the men's world. This divide is not of her choice. It's somebody else's choice. This is really the unfree part of the marriage or family contract of which we are talking. Thirdly, there are a lot of images created of women in Indian society. In that sense patriarchy is forced through patriarchies, through religion, through

beliefs, not so much through physical force, not through physical control, but making you believe in it. The belief is that you are the focus of the family and you are in charge of keeping, not only the daily functions of child rearing, cleaning, and cooking, but in charge of keeping the daily traditions in every sense of the word. And she is in charge of maintaining the family appearance which consists of not just custom and rituals, but also in the standard of living that you maintain. In that sense you belong to a cetain social group. You are expected to do certain social things. Now if the family income does not reach that level, you are also supposed to do something to bring the level there, but you are not really considered as a worker. But you are there to maintain whatever the family is supposed to maintain. So in that sense her role really is that of adjustment. Suppose there are old people. She is to nurse them. Suppose there are children, she has to look after them. Suppose there are disabled people, she has to look after them. Suppose the family income fails, she has to supplement it, too. In all senses she is the adjustment of the family. In this she is brought up for that matter, to play that role of the adjustor, so she's not taught any particular skill. She might be taught cooking, cleaning, or sewing, but much more important she's taught an attitude, so that when she goes to the other family as a wife, she becomes and takes up the role of maintaining the balance of the family. This belief is a much more important part of her education. It's not only that the woman is a sex object, she's a reproductive machine and she's the adjustor of the family. That is the tradition in the Indian family. You have this kind of tradition that rich people will have a wife to look after all of this. The husband might have a mistress outside for a physical relationship, a daliance. That was accepted as part of the social norm. A man was allowed to do that, provided he gave his wife the spirit of house control in which he didn't interfer. In that way she was a poor woman who has the appearance of being a pure woman. In that case she has a spirit of control which she could maintain her life. Despite the fact that now you have judges and prime ministers in India, who are women, you still have this basic idea that she is this control mechanism of the family. To a certain extent this is enforced through a guilt phenomenon built into her pysche, which is she is supposed to feel guilty if she doesn't do this(being the control mechanism) , so that any working woman feels guilty about the fact that she goes out and isn't there at home when her husband comes back or her children come back. I'm sure other countries also put this kind of guilt mechanism on women, but it is done very effectively here.

I would say my generation of people have suffered a great deal. We have tried to build up our lives, but we always have this background behind it. It has also given in traditional society protection for the women. The woman, when she came into the family as a wife, even if her husband

forms an alliance outside the house or didn't like her, was guaranteed a living in that family. It wasn't a living with dignity. It might be a precarious living, but she had that guarantee. Apart from whatever other phenomena have been, this guarantee is being removed from her, so that she has all the traditional handicaps and other imperatives. But the changes in the family structure may mean that the parents in law don't really have that kind of control over their son to enforce that; if you don't like the wife, it doesn't matter, she is still going to be there as your wife. Whatever he does outside the home, that kind of control, they do not have. So that is the kind of taking away the security for the wife. This is a problem in all castes, across all classes.

In each class there are these ideologies that start at the top and filter down. But really it is one of the peculiarities of Indian working society that you don't have the terrible working class which is free from the middle class norms. There is really no such class. When you go down into the lower class peoples, they will accept most of these norms as the norm. Now they might not so much insist on the purity part, because in every one of the parts of the economic exploitations here is the landlord. The landlord would rape the lower class man's wife. That is one way of enforcing his superiority over the man, that he would use his wife as well. To that extent the husband might put up with it, but on the whole, he would not like her to have an affair of her own choice. It's one thing that the landlord insists on sex. It's another thing that she has the choice. It is a kind of delicate balance. This idea of purity, of family goes down the caste into even the lowest castes. The higher caste women have a whole lot more freedom about divorce. To a certain extent remarriage is within our choice. Women must accept even then certain ideas about choices and decision making powers.

Problems that women face in India stem from their caste and community and from the region they live in. Some regions have a tradition of much more conservative ideas. Other regions have much less conservative ideas. In our treatment of women jobs are treated most conservatively. The Punjab region which extends into Pakistan shares a lot of the same ideas about the position of women. It doesn't matter that these women are Sikhs or Muslims. They have similar ideas with the Hindus about women. The religion tries to impose its own norms, so that they come back through family laws or marriage systems, but again laws and practices keep on differing. The practices would be similar by region, rather than by religions.

You would find, say in an area of northern India that has very conservative Hindu norms, that these Hindus have much more in commom with Muslims in the same region than with Hindus of south India. So region is a very important consideration in India. This is usually not mentioned when talking about women's positions. And this is reflected in one of the major indicators of Indian women's position, in

sex distribution ratios of the region. India, China, Pakistan, and to a certain extent some of the Middle East, there are fewer women in the population than men. All the first world countries have more women and also Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asian countries. There is a shortage of women in India. This sex deficiency in the ratio of women to men varies sharply from region to region. It is very high in the Punjab where there are only 900 women to every 1000 men. As you go south to Kerala there are more than 1000 women to every 1000 men. Punjab has the worst ratio, as you go south the ratio improves. If you take the ratio by age group, there is a deficit in the child age population. It is greater in North India than in South India or East India. This kind of regional pattern is very clear in India and has been very steady over the twentieth century. Over these years you find the same pattern which extends into neighboring countries. The pattern of Punjab flows into Pakistan. That of Bihar flows into Bangladesh. One of the things we've been trying to do in recent years is trying to understand why these patterns exist.

Part of the reason is ecological. A specific region is a plateau. It is basically dry or has low rainfall. It has a low population density so that women's labor is required in the economy. Women have to go out and work. They can't be kept inside the house. They are required in field labor as well. Now since they have the opportunity to come out, to get out of the house, there is a better sex ratio. It's really a better ratio, because women's labor is required in the economy. If you go to the Punjab, women's labor is used but not as field labor, so that the dominant class' workforce, or occupations like the military, does not use women. Women were used in the household economy, with the dairy, poultry, stitching, processing, or that kind of occupation, which really look as if they working. This phenomenon keeps on repeating in the daily work force participation rates. This is an Indian peculiarity. Going from region to region you get wide variations in the rate of work force particiapation by women. So if you look at the percentage of the women in the work force, it varies. In Andara, which is in the middle area of India, it is about as high as 40%, whereas if you go to Punjab it will be as low as 5%. This variation is also very sharp between regions. There are a lot of people including an American anthropologist who has been talking about work giving women work, so that in regions where women work, they get better work. I have some disputes with this, but I won't go into that now. This regional pattern comes out in work, in sex ration, child survival rates, and orphans.

Now I will talk about the women's movement. In India the women's movement has a very long history. We have had since about 1912-13 an all India Women's Conference. Before that in the nineteenth century, there was some social reform movements which were really about women. The first reformer, Raman Rao, promoted the abolishment of suttee, that is the

custom of burning the widow with their husbands on the funeral pyre. He did the first bid for abolishing this practice, so he is taken as the first social reformer in India. The whole nineteenth century reform movement was really for the benefit of women, that is for education, for women to remarry, for age of consented marriage- against child marriage. All the major nineteenth century social reform movement had a very major women's component in it. But this was not really a women's movement because most everyone promoting these women were men. There were a few wives of the social reformers who worked with their husabands. By the beginning of the twentieth century you did have a real women's movement here. First of all the women's sufferage movement had its counterpart here. It was a very small one, but it started here as a movement. And then with Gandhi's movement coming up, the nationalist movement coming up women made gains. A major argument in Gandhi's movement was that women are also a part of the citizenry and therefore women are a rich resource which was being wasted. The Nationalist movement could not afford this waste. Gandhi was one of the major social thinkerd here who argued that housework is very important work and that degrading women by saying it is nothing should be protested. He took a very strong line which partly reflects that he was thought of as the founder of a movement that shows housework and the women who do it are important. In fact women are a part of the workforce. All these ideas, Gandhi had argued. In the 1920's an 1930's when the nationalist movemnet was very much on the swing, women took part in large numbers. Not only did you have women leaders who were very dedicated presidents of the Indian Women's National Congress, but there was also a very large number of peasant women, working class women in the nationalist movement. All the protest movements of Mahatma Gandhi included large numbers of local, totally uneducated, totally uninitiated women in the nationalist movement. This gave women a very great position of strength before independence in Indian politics. This kind of movement went on all through the 1930's and 1940's so that even in all the leftist movements you have a strong women's component in it who took up the working class issues for the women. There was a peaceful movement, but we also had a violent movement among the nationalists. Women were in that case, too. Altogether you had women in politics and in poitical movements throughout the twentieth century before independence. Therfore, at the time of independence there was no doubt that women had to be given full poitical and social rights. We got our right to vote without any kind of real movement for it. It was given as a birth right. The constitution made almost all provisions for giving women equality, but this achievement was a very peculiar reversal after independence. Now the women's movement went underground. It disappeared. What you have now is a lot of middle class women, like I was, just part of the post independence generation. We were given rights for education,

higher education, and jobs. So we felt we had everything. We didn't have to fight for a women's movement. In fact the women's movement became a dirty word for social workers who did charity at that time. There have always been charity movements in India. These women were doing little things for little persons. We were free and independent. We were part of new India, so we didn't really have women's issues in India. This was the sort of belief for the first twentyfive years of independence. We all believed in it and acted in it. Now by 1970 this veneer was becoming musty because what was noticed in the working class area, where women had been working in the textile industry, in the mines, and in a lot of the modern industries, was that they were losing their jobs very rapidly.

In the 1960's and 1970's there was a protest movement coming out. Also medical reports in 1970 showed that India's sex ratio in the population, which had been falling from 1922-1961, fell more sharply from 1961-70. This sharp decline became very noticeable. Well, where were all the women going? In the 1970's Mrs. Gandhi was prime minister. She set up a commission on the status of women in India. She given the report in 1974. This really concerned her with the Women's Decade coming up in 1975. Some of our women went over to the Mexico conference and suddenly it came out in this report how women really were in India.

First, the sex ratio was going down and the child age sex ratio was decreasing. Secondly, dowry deaths were increasing very much. Thirdly, women had lost totally on the economic front, so that they were being pushed out of the modern sectors and into trraditional occupations or into unorganized occupations. All this data was presented in the Status Of Women Report. This data had been there; it was from official sources. We just hadn't noticed it. When it was put together, it became a very horrifying picture. That really sparked up a lot of consciousness among women. Along with that came several court cases which really shook the country.

One case occurred in 1974. This case was of a girl raped in police custody. Then the judges said, well, she was a prostitute, so it can't be a rape case. Therefore, the police aren't guilty. This verdict really made women angry all over the country. It became a symbol that women were being used. So, lawyers could just say, well, she's a prostitute and couldn't have been raped and so she couldn't have been murdered , even if a murder has been reported. So from 1975 onward, partly from this case, partly from the Status of Women Report and Commission, and partly from the way the international women's movement has gone, India got into the women's movement. What we have now are two kinds of movements. We have a fairly strong academic movement of women, which has done a lot of work on the women's issues. So, I think data wise, if you talk about most third world countries, India has probably the best data sources and analysis of data, debates about definitions, analysis of the

legal position of women, watch on treatment of women in the courts, and ideological arguments. The academic part is fairly well done in India.

We have also got some kind of working class group, but it is very much localized. For example, in Aurangabad, the membership in women's groups is 20,000. All the members are vegetable sellers, hand cart pushers, or block printers. There are all kinds of laborers. This organization has started its own bank for these women,so they can give them loans for opening their own businesses. These also have a health movement, maternity benefits movement, and electricity movement associated with it. This is a very strong organization in that region. Similarly there is another organization of a similar kind in Madras in the south. There are some organizations coming up in Delhi, in Lucknow, and other areas, but all over Indid there is very little working class movement as such in the women's movement. This is because most of the women work in the unorganized sector where they are underclass, where no trade union will touch them. If they work at home in their own field, it is very difficult to bring them under any particular banner.

In that sense we recently had a commission called the Self-employed Women's Commission on Studying the Working Conditions. They brought out a very negative report, but they also brought out the difficulties in organizing these women, because they are so spread out. Also they are so busy, they are so vunerable, and they are so bound by their religion that it is difficult to organize them. In that sense working class movements which are here for women are few and far between. What we're trying to do now is try to take up the ideological issues which we feel are much more important because even when you know a lot about the situation, you are trapped yourself. In your own movement most of the pressure comes from within the family, and you have to fight your own battles there. No outside help is available in fighting your battles there. So it is a matter of consciuoness, raising your positions in that. For that you need a lot more will, more confidence in yourself. So in that sense that is what the women's movement would like to do, take up the ideological issues.

The movement would also like to take up the legal position, because the courts are continually giving judgements against women. Even recently another similar case of a woman raped in custody was in the supreme court. The court said the women who brought charges of rape were loose women. Also since the men who were supposed to have raped them were men of position, they couldn't have done it. So we had to have a legal movement. In India we have some of the most modern laws in the world, but we have no legal system which will enforce them. Again and again this prejudice in the laws comes up. The lawyers won't take up the case. The police wouldn't pursue the case. The forensic report wouldn't come out. If you keep on fighting this battle against the system then there is a murder. The forensic

report wouldn't be there. The police wouldn't accept the case. Then if they accepted the case, they would treat the husband or man much better. The courts will not accept it. If one court does, then the senior court dismisses the case. This goes on and on. You also have another problem that anything we try to do, we get corrupted very easily. Whatever we might want to say about women, they too are corrupt. Last year I did my research with a four women commission. They said everything we wanted to say in the official report. They said they're going to do it all. But you know they're not going to do it, but since they said it, it really carries. They said, you know we're going to do it. It's there in the document. Every plan has a woman's chapter in it. It says about women they're going to do this and that. Anybody who really protests a lot gets a double job. So the corruption process is very prevalent. It goes on all the time. Since the problem is very big and the women who are conscious are not that many, it is very difficult to stop.

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Resources for Indian Women's Issues:

THE ASIA SOCIETY
Education and Communication Department
725 Park Ave.
New York, New York 10021

India-A Teacher's Guide
Focus on Asian Studies

Excellent book with many good lesson plans on locating India, describing India, national symbols, varna/jati-identity with a group, mythology-the one and the many,

articulating values, and marriage.

Donald and Jean Johnson. India Through Literature, 1973.

India's Working Women.

A sound filmstrip by Geraldine Forbes.

THE CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL TRAINING AND EDUCATION
777 U.N. Plaza
New York, New York 10017

Through Indian Eyes Vol. 1: The Wheel of Life, 1981.

THE CENTER FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
b-43 Panscheel Enclave,
New Delhi- 110017
India

This is an academic organization which is dedicated to help in the promotion, development, and dissemination of knowledge regarding the evolution of women's roles in Indian Society qith a view to a) enhance women's effective partici[ation in the development process, b) assist measures for realising women's equality, c) change social attitudes regarding women.

They have a wonderful library and have published a bibiliography on women in development.

WOMEN IN WORLD ARE STUDIES
Upper Midwest Women's History Center For Teachers
Central Community Center
6300 Walker St.
St. Louis, MO 55411

Women in India

A multimedia program by Marjorie Wall Bingham and Susan Hill Gross. topics include women in early Indian history, complexities of the Hindu marriage, women's loss of status, diversity of women's roles, 19-20th century reform movement, and women in 20th century India.

Appendix 16

END

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March 29, 1991